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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: WOUNDED AKP DISPUTES SIGNS OF DECLINE

REF: A. ANKARA 977

[1](#)B. ANKARA 834

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Speculation that the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) poor performance in March 29 local elections represented the first sign of the fall of AKP is mere "wishful thinking," according to a number of AKP insiders and analysts. AKP contacts told us that the party remains a cohesive unit, is taking steps to restructure following its lower-than-expected election results, and is re-thinking how it can implement policies to demonstrate to the Turkish public that it remains the only truly progressive, big-tent party in Turkey. Although it is clear that AKP has stumbled in recent times, the continued inability of Turkey's opposition parties to introduce new policy ideas or new leaders with broad-based appeal has helped AKP remain atop Turkey's political scene. Still, the party's ultimate long-term success will be determined not only by the level of fecklessness of the opposition, but on Prime Minister Erdogan's ability to lead the party in crafting the sort of progressive policies with broad-based appeal that brought AKP to power and led to its political dominance until now. AKP may be prodded along by internal polling that shows its electoral support contracting. END SUMMARY.

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Searching for Signs of AKP Decline  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Following AKP's poor performance in March 2009 local elections, many Turkish analysts and columnists have been quick to find signs that the results -- the first time AKP failed to increase its share of the vote since coming to power in 2002 -- represent the first sign of AKP's splintering and ultimate fall from atop Turkey's political structure. "Hurriyet's" Goksel Bozkurt speculated in a recent column that the situation surrounding a small group of AKP MP's boycotting the vote on a bill dealing with the demining of the Turkish-Syrian border, was evidence of a "clandestine opposition evolving in the AKP." According to Bozkurt, "Nothing has been the same in the AKP since the Cabinet revision. Problems keep occurring in the party organizations. Provincial caucuses witness fights. The AKP group administration faces difficulties working in Parliament despite Erdogan's warnings." Along a similar vein, Sabah's Rusen Cakir recently wrote that, "AKP has not been able to digest the shocking defeat it suffered in the municipal elections." The "defeat," along with "problems in the party administration" and "corruption scandals that forced the resignation of AKP vice-chairmen Saban Disli and Dengir Mir Firat" were signs of AKP's paralysis and vulnerability, according to Cakir.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Several AKP insiders and analysts told us that predictions of an imminent AKP decline are wishful thinking. According to these contacts, the tenacity and natural

political instincts of PM Erdogan, a conservative center-right electorate, and the continuing lack of a viable opposition make it reasonably certain that AKP will continue its political dominance at least as far as the next national elections, currently scheduled for 2011.

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Wounded AKP Regroups  
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14. (C) MP Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat, an AKP MP who resigned as party Vice Chair (and Erdogan's most senior advisor) in 2008, nominally due to health problems, conceded to us that AKP had come out of local elections wounded. Firat, a founder of AKP who by most accounts continues to hold PM Erdogan's ear, said voters had punished AKP for adopting a "statist, status quo" attitude and failing to introduce concrete projects for reform as it had in 2002, 2004, and 2007. The lack of initiative in recent years was driven in large part by a cadre of uncreative ministers, many of whom had been in office for 7 years, according to Firat. He thought that PM Erdogan's cabinet reshuffle was a critical, long-awaited first step to "address our mistakes and stem further decline." But to remain Turkey's preeminent party and to rule as a single-party government in the next elections, Erdogan would need to show that he is committed to further changes by naming new leaders to AKP's party administrative structure and parliamentary group in the summer and fall. The new AKP leadership should give a clear message to the Turkish public that the EU accession process is "front-and-center" of the party program and push ahead with human rights reforms in order "to show that AKP remains a

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big-tent party representing all groups, including Sunnis, Kurds, intellectuals, and leftists."

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Claims of Splintering Premature  
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15. (C) AKP Diyarbakir MP Abdurrahman Kurt told us that predictions of AKP decline were premature. Kurt said PM Erdogan, by relying on the "incorrect assessments" of some of his advisors, had become overly optimistic -- at times predicting that AKP would win 50 percent of the vote. Even prior to elections, Erdogan came to realize that such a lopsided win was extremely unlikely, Kurt contended. Kurt said the result (AKP won approximately 38 percent) accurately captured AKP's "true voter base," while AKP's win in 2007 (47 percent) was inflated due to voter reaction to the intervention of the military and judiciary into the political process. Kurt told us that claims of AKP splintering were vastly exaggerated. The recent reaction to the "boycott" of the vote on the landmine issue was a case in point. He said that he had been one of the group of AKPers from the Southeast who initially refused to vote on the landmine bill because he had received "insufficient information" about the bill. After receiving a more thorough explanation about the bill he and most of his colleagues were satisfied. Kurt believes AKP remains an inclusive party and will perform well in the next national elections because it "continues to be the only party that is working to address the problems of all groups, including Kurds, Alevis, Christians, and other groups."

16. (C) Deputy PM Bulent Arinc echoed these views during a June 10 meeting with the Ambassador. Although he allowed that some voters in local elections may have been turned off by what they perceived as an "uncompromising and overbearing" attitude by AKP, he said that the 47 percent that AKP won in 2007 national elections was "abnormal." A more accurate representation of AKP's support is approximately 40 percent of the electorate. He attributed the additional 7-8 points in 2007 to the "irresponsible" tactics of the military. Arinc was confident that AKP would make the correct policy

decisions in the coming years to score a solid victory in the next national elections.

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AKP Aided By Feckless Opposition  
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17. (C) Adil Gur, President of A & G Polling Company (the only polling company to accurately predict the outcomes of the last two elections), told us that AKP would continue to be the predominant party in Turkish politics through at least the next national election in large part because of a weak opposition. Gur said he believes that CHP and MHP, content with the increases their parties made in local elections, will be unable to match the organizational prowess of the AKP machine and PM Erdogan's ambition to win votes. Both Abdullatif Sener's newly formed party and a possibly merged ANAP-DP party would have little chance to match AKP's broad appeal to lower and middle class central Anatolian voters. Failing the emergence of a new political personality with broad appeal to match that of PM Erdogan, AKP would continue to remain the preeminent political party in the coming years, according to Gur.

18. (C) Firat told us that while AKP works to address its problems, the opposition appears content with its performance in local elections and is therefore likely to implement few policy changes that could attract additional voters in national elections. "CHP is content to maintain its position as the main opposition party, MHP is building its platform based on the limited issue of taking a hardline stance against the PKK, and DP and ANAP are electing "ancient" party leaders with no hope of introducing the new policies that Turkey needs.

19. (C) COMMENT: The AKP is putting its best face forward, but we understand their internal polling shows a continuing decline in electoral support which can only be worrisome to PM Erdogan as he weighs his political future. One AKP insider told us that AKP is currently polling close to 30 percent, and that it is seeing particularly low numbers among youth and among women voters. The rising unemployment rate is certainly hurting. Thirty percent in Turkey's political landscape is still a formidable level, but it introduces the prospect of a coalition government after the next election -- something the AKP has never before needed to countenance.

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